

Poughkeepsie Journal

Sunday, September 12, 2004

Study will test birds, PCB effect

Previous tests showed contamination by PCBs

By Dan Shapley

State and federal agencies assessing how PCBs damaged the Hudson River's natural resources will continue studies of three bird species in the Upper Hudson River to see specifically how PCB pollution may have harmed them.

The Hudson River Natural Resource Trustees finalized their plan for the study and announced it Tuesday. Work began this spring, and hundreds of bird eggs, nestlings and food from nests are being analyzed.

The study is part of the Hudson River Natural Resource Damage Assessment, which is a parallel process to the dredging of PCBs in the river mud north of Albany to begin in 2006.

"It's important because it is intended to show if PCBs are associated with adverse reproductive impacts on these particular species," said Kathryn Jahn, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist. "The work we did in 2002 showed that the sandpipers and kingfishers were the most highly exposed of the species we tested."

On the Hudson River, the trustees include the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the National Park Service and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

Trying to assess liability

Federal law makes polluters liable not only for cleanup -- in this case, the dredging ordered by the Environmental Protection Agency -- but also compensating for damage done to the natural environment. The study of birds is one of many facets to the Natural Resource Damage Assessment that has been ongoing since 1997 to define which and to what degree the river's natural resources were harmed by PCBs.

General Electric Co. discharged upwards of 1 million pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls into the Hudson from its capacitor manufacturing plants in the upper Hudson between the 1940s and 1977, when PCBs were banned.

GE is liable for the \$500 million dredging of the river, a \$65 million state plan to clean its Hudson Falls plant, as well as costs associated with the Natural Resources Damage

Assessment. GE, which claims to have spent \$250 million on other projects related to PCBs in the Hudson, is working to design the dredging project.

GE expects a protracted legal and scientific fight over the natural resource damage claim, spokesman Mark Behan said.

"There is a very substantial volume of research generated by state and federal agencies over 20 years, showing wildlife populations in the upper Hudson are diverse and robust," he said.

PCBs accumulate in body fat and can pose risks to humans in the form of cancer, developmental problems and other health concerns. Humans are most often exposed by eating contaminated fish. Birds are also exposed by eating contaminated insects and worms. Reproductive problems and deformities are potential problems.

3 species to be analyzed again

Spotted sandpipers, belted kingfishers and tree swallows will be studied because previous studies identified levels of PCBs in their bodies higher than other species.

As recently as 2002, studies showed the most contaminated birds and eggs had levels of PCBs exceeding the benchmark set by the government to define toxic waste.

Environmental groups expressed some concern the study will focus on only three species, and on only the upper Hudson River. But, the process is important to build a legally defensible case that PCBs damaged bird populations, said Rich Schiafo, environmental project manager for Poughkeepsie-based Scenic Hudson.

"The irony is the extent they have to go to prove injury," he said. "When you have 114 parts per billion (of PCBs) in tree swallow eggs -- more than twice the level of what is considered hazardous waste, that to me would constitute an injury. But they have to go over fairly significant hurdles and jump through hoops to prove this."

Dan Shapley can be reached at dshapley@poughkeepsiejournal.com

On the Web

The bird study is to conclude with a report at the end of 2006. For information, visit www.darp.noaa.gov